

## The Mailman Milkman Affair

I was walking across the park the other day when I saw a postman and a milkman boxing on the section of grass normally reserved for cricket.

They were still wearing their uniforms: white jacket and black trousers for the milkman. Blue trousers and red polo shirt for the postman.

A small crowd had even gathered. Passersby drawn from their daily lives to watch this strange spectacle being fought out on a damp municipal park in North Bristol. As though a page had been ripped out of a fairytale and blown on the wind to this part of town. Picked up by the protagonists and played out as best they could without props or a stage.

Whatever it was — improvised theatre or simply an ongoing feud — I was as transfixed as everyone else and it didn't take long before people started taking sides.

‘Go on postie! Come on milkman!’ came the shouts as more and more people joined the crowd.

Whether the fighters heard any of this, I wasn’t sure, but they both seemed to raise their game. The blows becoming faster and more direct until moments later the postman caught the milkman on the jaw with a fierce right hook. Sending him down onto the compacted earth of the cricket square with a loud thud.

But he wasn’t down for long and once they had restarted some shifty character in a flat cap and thick grey trousers started taking bets.

Most of the initial money seemed to be going on the postman, but I wasn’t convinced. While the mailman was certainly the younger and fitter of the two and had already floored the milkman once, the dairyman definitely had the weight advantage. And I was sure he needed only one good hit to finish the contest.

By now there must have been over a hundred people around the ring with money changing hands faster than a Vegas showdown. The bookmaker wasn't stupid either and quickly realised that in order to maximise his takings he needed to prolong the fight for as long as possible.

He quickly ran into the ring to split the fighters up and announced to the excited spectators that there would be a two-minute interval. Slightly bewildered, the two fighters went to opposing corners where some people who seemed to have a knowledge of boxing started relaying tactics and splashing water over their faces.

I'd never gambled before in my life, but if ever there was a time to take a punt, it was now. I waved a ten-pound note in the air and immediately a small boy forced his way through the crowd towards me. The boy, no more than nine years old and who had clearly been commandeered by the bookie as his skivvy, snatched the tenner out of my hand and asked who I was for: Postie or Milko — their official fight names.

I told him my bet and he quickly scampered back to his master to place it. Someone who'd been a boxing referee at one time or other had volunteered his services and the bookmaker, who was now all-round promoter, manager and gangmaster, happily obliged him.

What was certain on that Monday morning was that no-one was going home; this was high entertainment.

The fighters were greeted by a huge roar as they bounded back into the ring looking revitalised and eager to go.

'Milko!' screamed the fans of the dairyman against the opposing yells of 'Postie!' from the mailman's followers.

Both fighters were now stripped down to their trousers making the whole scene feel like an old French short story set on the damp plains of the Solonge or the Vendee. Two story-book characters fighting over land, a girl, money, a pig. Who knows? — I was pretty sure no one had bothered to ask them.

Despite their initial enthusiasm, the opening encounters to the second round were fairly tame with neither fighter taking any unnecessary risks. This didn't please the hyped-up crowd and a few boos rang out around the arena. The fighters took their cue and the blows started to rain in much to the delight of the baying mob.

And then Bang! Postie's guard went down allowing Milko — just as I'd predicted — to slam a perfectly weighted left hook into his opponent's face. Blood spurting out from a deep cut under his eye as he went down to the floor.

The referee started counting. One — Two — Three. Triggering a riotous roar from Postie's supporters urging him to get up. Four — Five — Six. Postie was hardly moving. Seven — Eight. The roar became louder and slowly Postie began to get to his feet. Nine! Postie stood on one leg and then after what seemed like an age, finally forced the other one up, until he was standing tall and ready to fight. A giant roar went up from everybody. Nobody wanted this to finish yet.

When the battle recommenced each man was giving it his all. The punches were coming in from all sides as each fighter pushed for the final victory. The noise level increased as the supporters demanded a knockout. Especially as I was pretty sure it wouldn't be long before the police turned up. Some idiot jobsworth concluding enough fun had been had for one day.

After about another minute of frenetic action, the fighters started to tire. Their work rate dropped and they seemed to be content to lock arms and hug each other, occasionally delivering the odd punch to prove they were still interested.

The crowd egged them on, trying to push one of them on for a final knockout. But they were done. Who knows how long they had been fighting for. They could have been at it for hours, days, years.

So when they finally collapsed to the ground, embraced like two lovers in an epic tragedy, a huge roar erupted over the park.

And then, just as quickly as they'd arrived, everyone drifted away. Leaving the two fighters, the referee and the bookmaker in the ring.

At first, I couldn't understand why nobody had asked for their money back — it was clearly a draw. It was only when I saw the bookmaker take his roll of money from his pocket and stuff it in between the bloodied bodies of the fighters that I got it.

And then like everyone else, I walked away leaving a postman and a milkman lying on the ground, the best of friends. Two men who'd given several hundred people a marvellous morning's entertainment.